

Fly High by Richard Yaxley

Winner of the 2024 StoryLinks Short Story competition

‘Food and rent,’ says Jolie’s dad.

She wishes he would reach out, maybe offer her a hug, but he doesn’t.

‘Sorry, love.’ He heads towards the sunroom.

Jolie understands. So does Taff, her brother. Which doesn’t make it any easier, but at least they know their dad is right.

Food and rent. All they can afford.

Taff looks up.

‘Any luck?’

She shrugs, disappointed. Her brother is lying on his bed. He turns onto his back and lobs a tennis ball, catches it.

Jolie says, ‘We could make one,’ as Taff keeps lobbing and catching.

‘What with?’ he asks.

Last year, because of the October storms, the kite festival was postponed, then, because of the length of the clean-up, abandoned. This year, the forecast is perfect: clear skies, light winds.

There are advertising signs all over town. The event will be held on the main beach, in front of the skate park. It’ll be bigger than ever before, with extra food vans, DJ Zanzibar coming up from Brisbane, cash prizes, the drawing of a raffle for a new SUV. A one-time finalist from *Australian Idol* doing a sunset concert.

Twenty dollars to enter. Double that to buy a decent kite, one that might have a chance of winning. Taff’s done the research. Forget your butterflies, dragons and sharks, your eagles,

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mermaids and boggly-eyed squids. There's a silver-blue parafoil, lighter, faster, made to be launched from the beach. Made to rise quickly into the air and stay there.

Made to win.

Taff has shown Jolie. She's agreed, the parafoil is the one. Pay a bit extra for delivery, and it can be on their doorstep in two days, giving them time to practise, get their technique right.

Seventy dollars for a chance to win at the festival.

Food and rent.

And medicine.

Jolie slices fruit and makes a pot of tea. She takes the tray to her mother. Kim is in the sunroom, her wheelchair parked by the window. The view across the ranges is the best thing about their house. At dawn, the land emerges as if surprised by its own beauty. Later, when darkness takes over, the sunlight that has been stored in the hills creates a metallic shimmer beneath the stone and grass.

Her mum says, 'Hallo, love. Sleep well?'

'Yes,' she lies. 'Here's your brekky. Can I get anything else?'

'No. This is lovely.' She touches Jolie's wrist, and mother and daughter look at the land, the stately trees poking through scarves of mist, the early joy of birds as they forage for grubs.

Kim asks, 'How's your dad?'

'Okay,' Jolie tells her. 'It's automatic. Dad's plugging along. He's doing his best.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.' A glance at her mother, the depletion that comes from daily pain, then she senses movement, the birds rising as one and skimming through the trees.

'Thanks for brekky,' says Kim.

Jolie waits for Taff to finish playing basketball with his mates before they walk home together. The afternoon light is fickle; it bends with the wind. There are people inside the memorial park flying their kites. The neon shapes twist and tumble like gymnasts.

‘Come on,’ says Taff.

Walk on, walk on. But at home, a surprise awaits. Their father greets them with a large parcel and suggests it be opened in the sunroom. He and Kim watch as Taff lifts the tape and tugs at the paper.

A kite. The basic trapezium shape, covered with green fabric. White ribbon for a tail.

When Taff turns it over, Jolie sees a crossbar lashed across a stick. On the underside of the fabric, written with black Texta—

Fly high. Love, Mum and Dad.

Why does she want to cry? Because of the loveliness of the gesture? Or because of the kite itself, so plain and inferior?

Not for the first time, Taff saves her.

‘That’s awesome,’ he says. ‘Thanks.’

They’ll have to launch it at the festival—no choice, not now—and that will mean ridicule or worse, sympathy.

Already, Jolie can hear the voices. Oh, those poor kids! Can’t afford a proper kite! Then, conspiratorially: it’s the mother, you know. She’s got MS. Oh, the father plugs along, does his best, but one job, and all those bills—

It’s tough, of course it is.

And sad, yes. Even so, the kite. *That* kite—

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‘We should practise,’ Jolie tells her brother. Taff disagrees. The kite is handmade. It’s flimsy. This kite won’t survive practice.

‘You mean, we’re just going to turn up and—’

‘Yes,’ he says. ‘I do mean that. First flight.’

‘*Only* flight.’

A tiny, shared smile. No choice, not now.

A glorious day, warm and breezy. The sharp smell of frying onions over the more diffused sourness of the sea. Music and laughter, running feet, excitement.

On the beach, the kite-flyers are being formed into groups. Someone says, ‘Did you make that yourself?’ Taff pretends not to hear. He turns the kite so the words on the back stay hidden.

Their steward is a big man with a festival t-shirt and a name badge. He tells them the rules: launch when the hooter sounds, stay within the designated zone, keep your kite clear of others. Prizes for the highest flight, the best manoeuvre, and the longest time in the air. If your kite comes down or collides with another kite, you’re out of the competition.

Jolie whispers to her brother, ‘Are we really doing this?’

Taff nods. He’s grimly determined. Both are aware of their parents, positioned away from the crowd on the path that leads to the lookout.

The hooter goes. The flyers surge. Taff skids towards an open area. He unwinds the line while Jolie holds the kite and runs. ‘Now,’ he yells, ‘now!’ and she lets go. The kite lifts—joy!—then bobbles and, for a horrible moment, threatens to fall, before the wind grabs it and lifts again—

It’s flying. Jolie’s chest is tight. Their kite moves into the sky, not elegant, not startling, but there, taking its place with the others.

Love, Mum and Dad, she thinks, as the green trapezium heads further away.

Suddenly she is aware of Taff beside her, crying out.

‘What?’ she says. ‘What?’

The line has snapped. It was too thin, the wind was too strong. Their kite will fall. It must fall!

Terrified, they wait for the moment; a kite freed of its anchor, readying itself for the final plunge—

But, no. Somehow, as if it has found its own heart and pumped its own blood, their kite continues to fly.

Around them, people begin to notice. They are mesmerised. They point and cheer, as the kite loops and sweeps with fantastical grace—

And stops, motionless and glorious, like a fixture on a wall.

Like a tiny green sun.

The air softens, the wind relents. People are silent. The world is silent. Which is when Jolie knows, Taff too, gently touching her hand.

Their kite will never fall.